

Returning to the Essence of Life

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Today, I'd like to talk to you about *Returning to the Essence of Life*.

Life blossoms in every corner our eyes can reach, filling the world with vitality and allowing human society to live and thrive. Broadly speaking, not only do all living beings in nature embody the power of life, but even stars and entire galaxies experience their own processes of formation, development, and eventual dissolution.

Among all forms of life, human life is undoubtedly the one we are most deeply connected to and care about the most. Simply put, human life is the journey we experience from birth to death, consisting of three aspects: living, life and death, and the true essence of life.

People usually care most about their living, which involves two levels: earning enough for basic survival and improving the quality of life.

To be alive, we must first solve the problem of survival. As the old saying goes, "Food is the first necessity of man"—our body cannot function properly without the energy provided by food. Beyond this fundamental need, we also need to take care of household expenses every day. Some people enjoy great blessings — they are born into wealthy families, with good fortune from birth. Especially in Chinese culture, parents often strive to accumulate wealth for their children, hoping they will never have to struggle for survival throughout their lives.

However, in some developed countries where social welfare systems are well established, basic survival may not seem like a major concern. Yet around the world, many people spend their entire lives struggling just to survive. They go to work day after day, tirelessly laboring just to earn their daily bread and support their families. Their purpose in living is very simple—so simple that it can be summed up in a single word: survival.

In fact, animals in nature—birds in the sky, fish in the sea, and beasts on the land—also struggle to survive, wandering about in search of food to satisfy their hunger, just like humans do. If we live solely for survival, how are we any different from animals? For every living being, survival is indispensable. But only human beings, after resolving the problem of survival, go on to pursue a higher quality of life.

Today, as hedonism prevails, almost everyone focuses on improving material conditions. Yet in reality, the benefits that material comfort can bring us are far less effective than we often imagine. As a result, more introspective people have begun turning toward spiritual pursuits, aiming to elevate the quality of their life – a life of art, a life of religion. We can say that spiritual life, rooted in self-transcendence, is unique to humans, and sets us apart from all other creatures in the natural world.

Apart from the everyday issues that we all care about, generations of philosophers and religious scholars have spent thousands of years exploring the questions of life and death. Life and death, the two attributes that accompany every human being, negate each other and yet are inseparable.

If we take a person's birth as the starting point of life's journey, then from the moment they enter this world, they are, with every passing moment, moving closer to its end. It is precisely because we are born that death becomes inevitable. As a philosopher once said: every experience of life moves toward death; this is its very nature.

So, where does life come from, and where does death lead? According to materialists, life comes from one's parents. Our bodies—every part of skin and hair—are gifts from them; when our mother gives birth to us, we come into being. The end of life, then, means the disappearance of everything, like a lamp being extinguished. Death, as the end of an individual's life, reveals the finite nature of human life.

However, most religions believe that a person possesses not only a physical body but also an independent soul. The body, bound by time, inevitably ages and decays, and will ultimately fade away. Yet the soul—transcending the body—is believed to be immortal and to continue its journey in another world. The Christian faith, for example, is built upon the hope of eternal life. Through divine salvation, the limited secular life is granted a new, everlasting life by sharing in God's own life. In their devout prayers, death is seen as a gateway to heaven, marking the beginning of a new life.

Materialists believe that life arises from matter; when the body disintegrates, the spirit also comes to an end. This is an annihilationist view, which holds that life ends with death and that every being has only a single, present lifetime. Yet we should realize that science, though powerful in exploring and transforming the external world, remains limited in its understanding of the essence of life. In contrast, religious thinkers believe that every being has both present and future lifetimes, and possesses an independent and unchanging soul. However, this belief falls into the opposite extreme—the view of permanence—and is also not the ultimate truth.

The Buddha, through the wisdom of dependent origination, observed the phenomena of life and taught that life extends through the past, present, and future. Life is a continuous flow of similar yet ever-changing states — neither permanent nor utterly ceasing. It includes not only the present, but also an endless past and an infinite future. It is like a river, flowing from the beginningless past into the endless future; it is also like an iron chain, with each link seamlessly connected to the next. Our present lifetime is only a single wave in the vast ocean, a single link in the endless chain.

From a materialist perspective, human life is indeed fleeting. However, when we understand life through the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings, we come to see that a person does not truly "die." What we call death is merely the close of one phase of life, a transformation in the form of life. At the same time, it marks the beginning of a new phase. As practitioners of Buddhism, we should not only care about happiness in this present life, but also about the direction of our future lives. Out of his compassion for all life, the Buddha, after attaining enlightenment, expounded to the beings of the Saha world the principles of happiness in this life, happiness in future lives, and the ultimate bliss of Nirvana.

Living is the manifestation of life, while birth and death mark the beginning and end of one phase of life. Yet the most essential in human life is not living, nor even the birth and death, but the essence of life itself. To transform our destiny, we must first understand—what is the ultimate nature of life?

A poet says, "Life is a sacred mystery, a secret law."

A biologist says, "Life is protein; it is amino acids."

According to the Dharma, these interpretations are incomplete. As the most spiritually endowed among all beings, we must use wisdom to unlock the mysteries of life. Only through this wisdom can we better understand and make use of this present life, rather than turning away from this life in ignorance or blind reverence.

Life consists of two major systems: the material and the spiritual. The material system refers to our physical body, made up of the elements identified by biologists. Our bodies come from our parents, carrying their genetic inheritance. Yet, the spiritual system is independent, with its own kind of inherited information—the karmic seeds stored in the Alaya consciousness since beginningless time. In everyday life, we often see that children of the same parents have very different characters and talents. Why is this so? It is because each being enters the world carrying their own unique stream of karmic information, with different starting points.

I often say that practicing Buddhism is, in the truest sense, a life engineering project. It can help us move from imperfection to perfection, from affliction and suffering to liberation and freedom, and from understanding life to fundamentally transforming it. Once we understand what life truly is, and recognize the importance of transforming it, we can begin to discuss “Returning to the Essence of Life.” I’d like to illustrate this from three aspects.

I. Returning to Right View

Beyond the basic material conditions for survival, what most directly shapes our lives is our view of life. Whatever we think, do, or say is inseparable from the influence of our views. Our views and actions support and reinforce each other. On the one hand, our views guide our actions and shape our choices; on the other hand, our actions in turn influence and transform our views. In a sense, growing up is a journey of coming to understand life and the world.

Unfortunately, most people often hold wrong views. This is because our views arise from perception, and perception itself is built on our senses. We tend to trust our own senses, taking what we see, hear, and perceive as the only reality. But are our senses truly reliable? In fact, our senses are far from reliable.

First of all, our senses are far from sharp. In a noisy environment, faint sounds are easily drowned out, making it nearly impossible for us to hear them clearly or even be aware of them. If this is the case for hearing, what about our sight? In darkness, even the brightest colors and the most beautiful landscapes become meaningless. Without the help of scientific instruments, the range of our perception is extremely narrow: things that are too small require a microscope, and those too distant require a telescope.

We all know the story of the blind men and the elephant. In a sense, we are not so different from the blind men. When we rely solely on our senses, we perceive just tiny fragments of the vast world, unaware of the greater whole and the deeper truth behind appearances. Without realizing this, we cling to our limited understanding of the world, so how accurate can our views really be?

Second, our senses can easily deceive us. Since ancient times, people have believed that the moon waxes and wanes, yet in fact, the moon itself never undergoes such changes. The Earth is constantly rotating—“travelling eighty thousand *li* (about 40,000 kilometers) a day” —but we can’t feel it at all. For centuries, people regarded Earth as the center of the universe. It was

not until the sixteenth century that Copernicus first proposed that the Earth actually revolves around the Sun. In his time, this discovery was shocking — many even saw it as heresy. We can imagine that if our understanding remained at that level, it would be hard for us to accept a fact so completely contrary to what our senses tell us.

The stars in the sky look so small that we could almost hold them in our hands. Yet astronomers tell us that many of them are far larger than the Earth. Some of these stars, by the time we see their light, have already vanished, because it takes thousands or even tens of thousands of years for their light to reach our eyes. When we sit in a boat, we may feel that the mountains on both shores are slowly drifting by, but in fact they are still; it is the movement of the boat that creates the illusion. And when we place a pen in water and see it appear bent, it is simply the refraction of light that deceives our eyes.

So, can science really correct the distortions of our senses? Today, many people place great faith in science and regard it as the standard for verifying truth. Yet over the past few centuries, as science has continued to advance, each era has established its own scientific theories. Some scientific conclusions that once seemed to be true have been continuously challenged and eventually overturned. This shows that when it comes to understanding the world, our senses are indeed unreliable, and science, still developing, is not the absolute truth either.

Our understanding of the world is also influenced by our emotions. When we like someone, we tend to perceive their flaws as strengths; but when we dislike someone, we often interpret their strengths as flaws. When we are in a good mood, everything around us seems extraordinarily beautiful: the sunlight shines brighter, the sky looks clearer, the trees nod at us, the flowers seem to smile at us, the birds sing for us, and the butterflies dance for us. The world is brimming with vibrant life everywhere. Yet when we are weighed down by negative emotions, the very same world loses its color and seems shrouded in a gray haze.

Family bonds and blood ties also give our perceptions a deep emotional tint. In the eyes of parents, their own child always seems especially important, constantly tugging at their hearts. Yet to those who are not related, that same child is no different from the countless others—perhaps even insignificant. Similarly, lovers deeply in love see each other as precious as life itself; every word or gesture from the other can bring immense joy or deep hurt. Yet to bystanders, such love is but a fleeting episode in the colorful tapestry of the world.

Our senses and emotions make it hard for us to perceive the world as it truly is. Among these distorted perceptions, one of the most common mistakes is confusing names with realities. Everything has both a name and a reality. Take a table, for example: there are the physical materials that make up the table, and there is the name “table” that we use to define it. But are the name and the reality the same thing? In fact, a name is merely a conventional designation, a symbol that helps us recognize and distinguish things. Yet we often fail to realize this, taking the name for the reality itself. In this way, our clinging to names often brings us unnecessary suffering.

In everyday life, which name matters to us the most? Our own. In fact, a name is merely a label given to us by our parents—like “Number One” or “Number Two”—without any inherent self-nature. Yet once we are given this label, we become attached to it as “me.” Whenever we hear our name, our ears immediately perk up: *Are they talking about me? What*

are they saying? If we hear praise or flattery, we feel happy; if we hear slander or insults, we feel hurt.

Our attachment to our name makes it difficult for us to bear any verbal offense. If someone calls us a donkey, a pig, or a fool, we may become furious, feeling as though our dignity has been insulted. But in reality, “donkey,” “pig,” or “fool” are nothing but empty labels. If you were to say “You are a donkey” to someone who does not understand your language, they would not even know what you meant — let alone feel offended.

Misperceptions also make us take appearances for reality. From the Buddhist perspective, everything is a temporary form that arises from conditions. Take, for example, the table in front of us: it is merely a combination of materials—wood, nails, human labor, and so forth. These non-table conditions come together to create a useful object. For convenience, people in the past gave it the name “table.” But if one of these conditions were to disappear, the table itself would cease to exist as well. This shows that the table is not an independently existing, unchanging entity, nor was it inherently meant to be called a table. The name is simply a convention that has been passed down over time. If people in the past had decided to call it a “monster,” then every table we see today would be a “monster,” and that word would sound completely normal — no one would react with fear or surprise. What is true of the table is equally true of all things.

The *Diamond Sutra* teaches: “All conditioned phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow; like dew or a flash of lightning; thus should one view them.” Everything that exists is a provisional appearance arising from conditions, without any independent, unchanging, or self-determining essence. If we can contemplate everything we encounter in this way, we will not become attached to them, or be disturbed by their changes. In other words, we are no longer controlled or carried away by the circumstances around us.

Another common misunderstanding about life is our expectation of permanence. We constantly wish that everything connected with us could last forever—our lives, our careers, our wealth, our families, and our relationships. Yet, everything in the world is impermanent and constantly changing. If we fail to see this truth and cannot let go of our desire for permanence, we will inevitably suffer.

When we expect our wealth to last forever, we cannot accept the collapse of a company. When we expect our family to stay whole forever, we are crushed by its breakup. When we expect friendships never to fade, we are hurt by distance. When we expect love to remain unchanged, we are wounded by betrayal. Change is happening at every moment. If we cannot accept it, we will fall into suffering and repeat one tragedy after another.

Therefore, to transform our lives, we must first transform our understanding by establishing a right view of life. Western philosophy, from its early inquiries into the cosmic essence in ancient Greece to its shift toward epistemology after the sixteenth century, reflects the crucial role of understanding capacity. The way we understand the world determines the world we see and the life we live.

Let our understanding return to the reality of the world! At every moment, may we see things as they truly are—not deceived by false appearances, untouched by emotions, and undisturbed by any external factors. Just as there are five apples on the table, in our perception there are

exactly five apples—neither more nor less. The same applies to our understanding of living, birth and death, and the essence of life itself.

How can we see everything as it truly is and establish the right views? This cannot be achieved without the wisdom of the Dharma. Even today, across different faiths, the Buddha is widely regarded as one of the greatest thinkers in human history. As the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss once remarked: “What, after all, do I truly understand — from the writings of masters or philosophers I have read, from the societies I have thoroughly studied, and from the so-called sciences in which the West takes such pride? Even if I were to gather them all together, they would amount to no more than a few scattered phrases; they cannot compare with the wisdom of the sage who once meditated beneath the Bodhi tree.”

Such wisdom is attained through practice; it reveals the true nature of life and the universe. It never grows outdated with the passing of time, but continues to offer practical guidance for our lives today. According to the Dharma, all delusions arise from beings’ ignorance – the root of wrong views, as well as the source of afflictions, suffering, and even crime. Thus, spiritual practice must begin with establishing the right view. From the Three Stages of Listening, Contemplation, and Practice, to the Four Dharma Practices and the Noble Eightfold Path — all are founded upon the right view.

By understanding the right view of impermanence, we can free ourselves from the attachment to permanence. People always live under the illusion of permanence, wishing that everything around them would never leave or change. Yet in reality, everything is impermanent. When life doesn’t go as we wish, suffering naturally arises. When we truly understand impermanence, we can face every change—whether hardship or ease, failure or success—with calm acceptance. This is because all these changes are temporary and ever-changing, following the cycle of arising, abiding, decaying, and ceasing.

Understanding the right view of no-self, we can free ourselves from the afflictions arising from self-attachment. This self-attachment is the root of greed, hatred, and delusion, leading to countless unwholesome actions, such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and false speech. Only with the right view of no-self can we eliminate suffering at its very root.

By understanding the right view of “causes, conditions, and effects,” we can avoid seeing things in a subjective, partial, or narrow way. This enables us to see the world as it is and handle all matters with skillful means. With this right view, we can face all favorable and unfavorable circumstances calmly. When life is going well, there is no need for pride or self-satisfaction, for such good fortune simply arises from wholesome causes sown in the past and cannot last forever. When adversity comes, there is no need to blame others or complain about fate, for we are simply bearing the results of our own past mistakes—who else could we blame? Moreover, the right view of “causes, conditions, and effects” allows us to craft a beautiful blueprint for our future lives. The future we hope for depends on the seeds we sow now; to change our future, we must begin by transforming the causes we create now.

II. Returning to Nature

Human beings are an integral part of nature. When the profound vitality of nature fills our hearts, it can bring a deep sense of peace and joy. Therefore, let our lives return to the embrace of nature!

Have you ever noticed that the world is a vast universe, while our body is a small universe? Look closely—how similar the Earth’s structure is to our own: its rivers, lakes, and seas are like the blood that flows within us; its rocks are like the bones that support our frame; its soil, like the flesh that envelops our bodies; and its flourishing vegetation, like the hair that covers our bodies. The sky, shrouded in clouds at times and clear and bright at other times, reflects our changing moods of sorrow and joy. The brilliant sunlight is like our radiant smiles, while the falling rain and snow echo our sorrowful tears. When storms arise and cause great trees to sway and tremble, they mirror the tempestuous anger that sometimes surges within us. In fact, we are one with nature, and our lives are meant to be intimately connected with the rhythms of the natural world.

Human beings once lived like other animals, relying entirely on nature’s gifts for survival. While modern civilization has brought us countless conveniences, it has also led us further and further away from the natural environment and from the way of life it sustains. We can no longer return to the past, for we have lost the ability to survive within a purely natural environment.

The building of houses freed humanity from the primitive age of cave dwelling, and provided more comfortable living conditions. However, as architecture advanced, it also trapped urban dwellers within jungles of steel and concrete — lifeless environments where trees and grass have become rare luxuries. I usually live in the mountains, and when I go to the city, I can feel a restless, uneasy atmosphere hanging in the air.

What has led us away from a life in harmony with nature? What has caused such tremendous changes in the world? It is human greed—the blind and insatiable pursuit of material possessions. We try to satisfy our desires by constantly acquiring more food, clothing, and shelter. Once we have all these — when we no longer worry about basic needs, or fear that our “thatched hut might be broken by the autumn wind,”— new desires immediately arise. Even when our material lives reach a comfortable level, we remain dissatisfied. We are driven by the urge to compare ourselves to others: striving for finer clothing, more luxurious homes, and greater social status.

In this ceaseless cycle of comparison, the original purpose of food, clothing, shelter, and transportation has been lost. People today are dissatisfied not because of material shortage, but because of the discontent and frustration born of constant comparison. This comparison, in turn, fuels fierce competition, forcing everyone to struggle under immense pressure to keep pace with the rapidly changing world — leaving many exhausted.

I believe that placing too much emphasis on economic development brings serious side effects—often with the harm far outweighing the benefits. Many people admire Japan for its strong economy, but to me, Tokyo is a paradise for making money, but a hell for living. When I visited Tokyo, I found it filled with overwhelming noise and tension. On the streets, everyone seemed to be in a hurry, with emotionless faces, like robots. I could not understand what joy could be found in living such a life. Although I at first planned to stay there for a year or two to do academic research, I left after just one month. Hong Kong, another example of economic success, feels like one vast department store. “Living in this jungle of steel, concrete, and constant noise, where material desires are fully satisfied, but nature is missing, people easily become restless and anxious.

In today's world, technology is advancing at a breathtaking pace, making life ever more convenient and comfortable, and the world more colorful and diverse. Yet the temptations brought by material abundance constantly stimulate our desires, driving us to seek more, newer, and better forms of pleasure. But have we ever stopped to reflect: while enjoying all these pleasures, what price have we paid?

Relentlessly pursuing material desires forces us to spend even more time earning money. In today's world, where "earning more and spending more" has become fashionable, we have easily cast aside the age-old virtue of frugality and now embrace a culture of materialism as if it were the natural way of life. But what exactly are we giving up in return? Beyond labor and skill, we are spending our time, and to spend time is, in essence, to spend life itself. In the surge of desire, we have lost ourselves. We spend our lives chasing endlessly, with almost no time left to stop, reflect, or care for our inner spirit.

Relentlessly pursuing material desires steals away our inner peace. Delusions born of greed gnaw at our unguarded hearts like demons. Our craving for wealth blinds us to the great traps hidden beneath our desires and to the dark, twisted face of craving itself.

Relentlessly pursuing material desires is the root cause of conflict. Within families, conflicts arise between parents and children, brothers and sisters, and husbands and wives—all driven by clashes of interests. In society, similar conflicts erupt among families, companies, and industries. On the international stage, they spark disputes between regions, ethnic groups, and nations. Relentlessly pursuing material desires is also the primary culprit in the destruction of our planet. In only a century, humanity has sought to conquer nature on an unprecedented scale, recklessly exploiting natural resources that took billions of years to form, and depleting nearly half of them. The excessive development of energy resources has led to ecological imbalance, triggering natural disasters and environmental pollution, and posing profound threats to the survival of humanity.

Are material possessions and wealth the only path to happiness? People without career success or financial abundance often see them as guarantees of happiness. In fact, this is merely wishful thinking. During my years of sharing the Dharma, I have met many people who are highly successful in business, possessing fortunes worth millions or even billions. Yet many of them are unable to enjoy even the simplest pleasures of life. They possess luxurious villas, yet find themselves unable to fall asleep peacefully; they are presented with the finest delicacies, yet feel no appetite at all. Amid a life of luxury that others can only dream of, have they ever truly experienced a genuine sense of happiness?

How can human beings attain happiness? How can we live a joyful life? First, we must return to nature and learn to enjoy what it offers. Fresh air, pure blue skies, misty rain, gentle moonlight, rolling green mountains, murmuring streams — all these blessings are around us. The beauty of nature is equal for everyone, and the more natural a thing is, the closer it is to the essence of life. As long as we set aside our worries, we can feel at ease in nature's embrace at any moment; as long as we let go of our desires, we can be nourished by nature's gifts at any time; as long as we keep a calm and simple mind, we can enjoy the vast world freely without paying any price.

"In spring, there are a hundred blossoms; in autumn, the full moon. In summer, a refreshing breeze; in winter, the falling snow. If no trivial matters burden your mind, every season is the

best season in life.” This Chan poem teaches us how to attune ourselves to nature and to cultivate a serene state of mind. Indeed, the sweetest joy in life has always been the simplest and most timeless ones.

The complexity of modern society has deprived life of its freedom. Living in such a noisy environment, our delusions and afflictions have expanded as never before. We work endlessly, with no real time for leisure, and gradually lose the spiritual vitality inherent in human nature, forgetting the very essence of life. As a result, we enjoy many pleasures, yet do not feel happiness; we possess many conveniences, yet are not truly free. We are merely using up our lives, without knowing how to truly live them.

The competition of modern society breeds tension and anxiety. Returning to nature allows us to fully relax both body and mind. We do not have to weigh gains and losses against nature, compete with it, or deceive it. Amidst the natural world, our hearts become simple and pure. We can rest upon a rock, letting our thoughts grow still, and allowing every muscle and every cell in our body to fully relax. We can stroll through the forest, anchoring our awareness in the simple movements of each step and gesture. We can sit quietly beneath a tree, watching flowers bloom and fade, observing clouds gather and drift away.

Regrettably, most of us overlook the gifts of nature. Our minds are filled with concerns about career, family, and wealth, leaving little space to notice the most beautiful presences within nature, nor have we ever truly learned to cherish them. Especially in today’s economy-driven world, we often sacrifice nature for the sake of economic interests, carelessly destroying the very environment that sustains us—our only true home.

How much fresh air remains? Cities are shrouded in various forms of pollution, and even the countryside is increasingly affected day by day. How much clean water is left? Rivers are either polluted by industrial waste or gradually drying up as the climate changes. How many lush forests still survive? The growth of trees lags far behind humanity’s rampant deforestation. If we do not cease our reckless destruction of nature, the day will surely come when we will become the first victims of the disasters we have created. In fact, the signs of disaster are already emerging, and it is time to awaken to the danger. For thousands of years, humanity has upheld the principle of harmony between nature and humanity—this is the true way to coexist with nature. We must learn to be grateful for nature, cherish it, protect it, delight in its beauty, and find joy and peace within its embrace.

A happy life can be obtained through simple living. The basic things we need to live are few: food to ease our hunger, clothing to keep us warm, a home for rest, and transportation to get us where we need to go. These needs are not difficult to fulfill. When we are hungry, everything we eat tastes delicious; when we are tired, we can sleep soundly anywhere.

Why do people today have so many demands? Many of the things we think we need are not truly our own needs, but rather what society has taught us to want. Today, people’s desires are growing without limit — nourished by industrial civilization and stimulated by material conditions. A life driven by the endless pursuit of material possessions inevitably breeds countless forms of suffering and affliction. That is why sages, from both East and West, have long advised us to reduce our desires and learn contentment.

If we pursue power, we become bound by it; if we pursue career success, we become hindered

by it; if we pursue wealth, we become shackled by it. We have neither time nor leisure—our entire lives are spent in endless exchanges. Yet once we learn to let go—fulfilling our worldly responsibilities without clinging to them—we can experience freedom of letting go: walking with ease, sleeping in peace.

I have never entered politics, so I cannot truly imagine how exhausting and complicated official social engagements must be. But sometimes, when lay followers invite me to a meal and set out a full table of dishes, after tasting only a few, I can no longer tell one flavor from another, and soon begin to feel drowsy. This feeling is much like walking through a bustling marketplace. If I were to describe the feeling in one word, it would be “exhausting.” As Laozi once said, “Too many colors blind the eyes; too many sounds deafen the ears; too many flavors dull the taste; hunting makes the heart go wild.” This ancient wisdom reminds us that an overly complex environment brings confusion to both our senses and our minds.

By living simply and naturally, we cultivate a purer heart.

By living simply and naturally, we can better protect the Earth’s limited resources.

By living simply and naturally, we do not have to spend all our time rushing to satisfy material desires, but can enjoy the leisure that life offers.

By living simply and naturally, we foster peaceful coexistence among people and reduce the crimes caused by intense competition, and even prevent various wars.

II. Returning to the True Self

Returning to the true self means bringing our character back to the original nature of life.

The self is something that we all believe we know well. Each of us lives deeply immersed in a strong sense of self, spending our entire lives busily striving for this self—for my career, my family, my children, my reputation and status, my wealth. Everything we care about revolves around this self. In each person’s heart, the self holds a sacred position and has supreme authority.

Throughout human social development, it is precisely the attachment to the self that has given rise to private ownership and, ultimately, all forms of inequality. Because of this self-attachment, human beings not only cling deeply to this self, but also crave to possess more and more things as “mine.” For example, within families, this self-attachment takes several forms. On the one hand, it appears as parental authoritarianism. Especially in China, people have deeply rooted family values that parents often see their children as extensions of themselves, or even as their private property. They impose their own ideas and ways of life upon their children, ignoring the children’s individuality and independence. As a result, the children often suffer greatly. On the other hand, self-attachment also reveals itself as excessive possessiveness between spouses. For a long time, inequality between men and women meant that women were treated merely as dependents in a male-dominated society. As a result, neither side could experience genuine freedom within the relationship.

Self-attachment creates deep barriers between people and is the root cause of human inequality. It gives rise to countless afflictions in life and serves as a fundamental source of

social crime. We speak of “I” countless times each day—yet what, truly, is this “self?” In our lives, there are external possessions and inner qualities. External possessions include our careers, reputations, and social status, as well as our credit cards, houses, cars, and even our spouses, children, friends, and so on. We often take these external things as the measure of our lives and the standard of our success, blurring the line between them and the true self.

In life, we often see such examples: if one’s career is successful, one feels superior; if one’s occupation is humble, one feels inferior. If one possesses great wealth, one feels proud and arrogant; if penniless, one feels too embarrassed to face others. Yet it becomes clear that all these things are only temporarily “mine”, and none of them can escape the law of impermanence. Our reputation and social status cannot be held forever; our credit cards, houses, and cars may change ownership at any time; even our spouses and children may see their relationships with us change through the gatherings and separations. It becomes clear, then, that these external possessions do not represent the true self. Only through misperception do we mistake them for part of “me.”

Then, could this physical body itself be considered the true self? Normally, everyone cares most about their own bodies. When we work for others, we often count rewards and losses. Yet, for decades, we spend our lives serving our physical body—feeding it, clothing it, nurturing its growth—without complaint or regret. At first glance, it seems that the body naturally represents the true self. But upon deeper reflection, we realize that this body is nothing more than a temporary combination of the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air.

With modern medical advances, many parts of the body can now be replaced like mechanical parts; if a leg is broken, it can be fitted with a prosthetic; if the heart fails, it can be replaced with an artificial one made of synthetic materials. Even head transplants are no longer a fantasy. Perhaps in the near future, a person might have another head upon their shoulders. But then, would that head still be “you?”

Furthermore, the body is in constant change—growing, aging, and decaying. From infancy to youth, to adulthood, it is transforming every moment. For meat eaters, the raw materials that make up the body come from animal flesh; for vegetarians, from plants and fruits. Perhaps that is why carnivorous animals tend to be more aggressive, while herbivores are relatively gentle.

Thus, the body is akin to a temporary house—a place we live in for a while, but can never truly own, or keep from falling into decay. Life itself depends on a single breath: as long as breath persists, we are lively and radiant; once it ceases, the body quickly decays. Clearly, then, the physical body cannot represent the true self.

Now, let us turn to our mental activities. The realm of the mind is complex and intricate, no simpler than a vast governmental organization. As the physical body grows and matures, the mind too becomes enriched and developed. Speaking from my own life experience, my thoughts and knowledge have been shaped by my parents’ teachings during childhood, by my teachers’ guidance at school, and by the influence of society after I embarked on the path of spreading the Dharma. Everything I think and believe today has been gradually formed, bit by bit, over a long period of time.

Although we often say every day, “my thoughts, my opinions,” and sometimes express some

lofty ideas, we notice that at each stage of life, our thoughts and opinions are not fixed. They keep evolving as our experience deepens and our knowledge expands. Even as we keep saying, “I like this, I dislike that; I am happy, I am sad,” our perceptions shift along with our state of mind. When we like someone, even their faults appear as virtues; when we dislike someone, even their virtues become faults. When we are joyful, every cell in our body seems to smile; when we suffer, even the sun, moon, and stars appear dim. The self in suffering cannot imagine the self in joy, and the self in joy cannot imagine the self in suffering. So, which truly represents the true self—the self in suffering, or the self in joy?

What exactly is the “self?” From the above analysis, we can see that what we call the “self” is actually made up of many non-self elements. None of these non-self elements can represent the true self. If we mistake them for the true self, our lives will be clouded by afflictions.

We should contemplate life through the wisdom of dependent origination. By doing so, we can clearly see that wealth, status, family, career, reputation, and all worldly phenomena — even our physical body — are impermanent and ever-changing. We cannot possess them forever, nor can we take them as our true selves. When we understand this, our attachment to worldly things naturally lessens. Our mind becomes free from material desires, no longer controlled by them. In this way, we can maintain inner transcendence and independence.

We should also observe our thoughts with the wisdom of dependent origination. Within our minds arise countless thoughts and emotions. Some say the world is dangerous, but I believe the human mind is even more perilous. When we speak of the mind, we often think only of others’ minds, but here, I mean our own. Within each of us lie countless traps: greed, anger, selfishness, doubt, arrogance, jealousy, desire, ignorance, and unhealthy habits. Without wisdom, our minds easily fall into these traps, allowing greed, hatred, suspicion, pride, jealousy, and desire to control us. Without the wisdom to observe these emotions, we become trapped by them without even knowing it—mistaking small, fleeting gains for the whole of life and letting passing emotions dominate our minds.

Without the wisdom to observe clearly, we lose the ability to discern truth. We can no longer see through appearances to perceive the true nature of things. As a result, we mistake what is not the true self for the true self, giving rise to endless afflictions and suffering. Attachment to the self is the root of all suffering in the world, the source of all afflictions, the origin of all disasters, and the cause behind all crimes. Only by realizing the truth of no-self can we eliminate all the suffering that arises from this attachment.

By realizing the truth of no-self, we gain better mastery over our thoughts. When we can clearly see the arising of every thought and every emotion, we will no longer be controlled by them.

By realizing the truth of no-self, we come to understand life as it truly is. We no longer cling blindly to anything—whether within or beyond the body—as the true self, nor are we disturbed by the impermanence of the world.

By realizing the truth of no-self, we can awaken the wisdom that is inherently complete and uncover the ever-present Buddha-nature within.

Let us return to our true self, the very essence of life!